

CHILDHOOD BETWEEN LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY.
READINGS OF CHILDHOOD IN MANOEL DE BARROS' POETRY

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Abstract:

Childhood has been historically and socially linked to the idea of lack, absence, or incompleteness. This understanding has led to the consequent idea that the adult universe could fill it--complete it with what it is supposedly missing. Historically speaking, the adult exercise of power over children has become generalized and has acquired a strong ally in the educative process. We presume to know so much about children, and we interpret them from the point of view of what we ourselves have been, or from what we imagine we have been. Our individual experiences are perceived as models for the infant understanding of things. Paradoxically enough, our knowledge about childhood separates us from it. We already know a lot about childhood, we think; there's nothing more to say. But maybe that's preferable, for if there is nothing more to say about childhood, the time to learn with children what childhood has to say to us has come. To think childhood only in the space allowed within the margins of our interpretative schemes is to mistrust the possibility that children can or have ever escaped those imposed dimensions. But, what about thinking childhood on or outside those margins? To talk about the childhood invented by the Brazilian poet Manoel de Barros, by his memories and ours, and to search for new concepts of childhood, demands a different approach. Childhood as we have come to understand here makes of teaching--as of reading and writing in general--a poetic experience, full of feelings, emotion and reason. What is proposed here as a project of inquiry is in this case the same as many others, but also profoundly different, and difficult to inaugurate, for here the object--childhood--is altered by the gaze of the inquirer herself, which implicitly changes the character and even the details of the methodology which follow from the gaze.

Key words: Childhood; Manoel de Barros; Education; Philosophy; Poetry

Infância Entre Literatura e Filosofia. Leituras da Infância na Poesia Manoel de Barros

Resumo:

A Infância tem sido histórica e socialmente ligada à idéia de falta, ausência ou incompletude. Este entendimento levou à idéia subsequente de que o universo adulto poderia preenchê-la, completá-la com o que supostamente estaria faltando. Desde um ponto de vista histórico, o exercício de poder dos adultos sobre as crianças tornou-se generalizado e adquiriu um forte aliado no processo educativo. Presumimos saber muito sobre as crianças e as interpretamos a partir do que nós mesmos fomos, ou do que imaginamos ter sido. Nossas experiências individuais são percebidas como modelos para a compreensão infantil das coisas. Paradoxalmente, o nosso conhecimento sobre a infância nos separa dela. Nós já sabemos muito sobre a infância. Não há mais nada a dizer. Mas talvez seja preferível, se não há mais nada a dizer sobre a infância, que tenha

chegado o tempo para aprender com as crianças o que a infância tem a nos dizer. Pensar a infância apenas no espaço permitido no interior das margens de nossos esquemas interpretativos é desconfiar da possibilidade de que as crianças possam ou já mesmo tenham escapado dessas dimensões impostas. Mas como seria pensar a infância nas margens ou fora dessas margens? Falar sobre a infância inventada por Manoel de Barros, por suas memórias e as nossas, e procurar novos conceitos de infância, exige uma abordagem diferente. A infância, como a estamos entendendo aqui, faz do ensino - como da leitura e da escrita em geral - uma experiência poética, plena de sentimentos, emoção e razão. O que propomos como um projecto de pesquisa é, neste caso, o mesmo que muitos outros, mas também profundamente diferente, e difícil de inaugurar, pois aqui o objeto, a infância, é alterado pelo próprio olhar da pesquisadora o que, implicitamente, muda o carácter e até mesmo os detalhes da metodologia que decorrem a partir do olhar.

Palavras-chave: Infância; Manoel de Barros; Educação; Filosofia; Poesia

Infancia Entre Literatura y Filosofía. Lecturas de la Infancia en la Poesía de Manoel de Barros

Resumen:

La infancia ha sido histórica y socialmente vinculada a la idea de carencia, ausencia o incompletud. Este conocimiento llevó a la idea subsiguiente de que el universo adulto podría llenar, completar lo que se suponía que estuviera faltando en la infancia. Desde el punto de vista histórico, el ejercicio de poder por parte de los adultos sobre los niños se ha generalizado y ha adquirido un fuerte aliado en el proceso educativo. Suponemos saber mucho sobre los niños y los interpretamos a partir de lo que nosotros mismos fuimos, o imaginamos haber sido. Nuestras experiencias individuales son percibidas como modelos para la comprensión infantil de las cosas. Paradójicamente, nuestro conocimiento acerca de la infancia es lo que de ella nos separa. Ya sabemos mucho sobre la infancia. No hay nada más que decir. Sin embargo, puede que sea preferible, si no hay nada más que decir acerca de la infancia, que haya llegado el tiempo de aprender con los niños lo que la infancia nos pueda decir. Pensar la infancia solamente en el espacio permitido en el interior de los márgenes de nuestros esquemas interpretativos es desconfiar de la posibilidad de que los niños puedan o hasta mismo ya hayan escapado de estas dimensiones impuestas. ¿Pero, cómo sería pensar la infancia en los márgenes o fuera de estos márgenes? Hablar de la infancia inventada por Manoel de Barros, en sus memorias y en la nuestra, y buscar nuevos conceptos de la infancia, requiere un enfoque diferente. La infancia, como la entendemos aquí, hace de la educación - como también de la lectura y de la escritura en general - una experiencia poética, llena de sentimientos, emociones y razón. Lo que proponemos como proyecto de investigación es, en este caso, lo mismo que muchos otros, pero también profundamente diferente, y difícil de inaugurar, pues aquí el objeto, la infancia, se modifica por la mirada de la investigadora que, implícitamente, cambia el carácter e incluso los detalles de la metodología que resultan de la mirada.

Palabras clave: Infancia; Manoel de Barros, Educación; Filosofía; Poesía



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*"...poetry has the function of preaching
the practice of childhood among men."*

Manoel de Barros

Adulthood

The different conceptions that the term "childhood" gathers to itself go beyond the sense of a period in human life which begins at birth and continues until puberty. Several figural senses commonly point to the idea of an initial period of existence, and childhood in this sense is understood as a principle of human life—its beginning, a step to be followed by others which are subsequent to it, derived from it. Distinct explanatory approaches try to explain the phenomenon of "childhood" in its biological, psychological, social and pedagogical particularities, among others. But none of them seems ultimately to approach in any satisfactory way the initial dimension that childhood imposes on the human person.

The question which interposes itself along and between these different interpretative pathways seems to refer to the way in which childhood as *beginning* is valued. What are the meanings that the term "beginning" can contain and what do they represent? What meanings does the concept inaugurate and propitiate? Usually it is identified with the absence of experience, with the need for assistance, with something deprived of its own highest value, with the start of a sequence previously determined, or even with the first part of a delineated whole. Childhood is often associated with these conceptions of beginning, which affirm that the child needs experience, that she needs adult assistance, that she needs to be protected, that she is still not ready.

Correlatively, childhood is also considered to be a period of the absence of responsibilities, the absence of autonomy, and a corresponding absence of severity in dealing with her. There are still those who consider the child unable to understand or to be understood due to the absence of an "adult" or "refined" linguistic repertoire, and as a consequence, in need of a prolonged period dedicated to building that repertoire.

In short, childhood has been historically and socially linked to the idea of lack, absence, or incompleteness. This understanding has led to the consequent idea that the adult universe could fill it, complete it with what it is supposedly missing. This ostensible adult completeness has, in its time, created a special attention to children's need for survival, but has also these needy ones into fragile and inept beings who cannot survive apart from adult education and control. Historically speaking, the adult exercise of power over children has become generalized and has acquired a strong ally in the educative process. But children have been educated much more in the interests of their submission to the rules of an "adult centered" world than to their own possibilities.

There is a certain agreement among adults about children's nature that considers it acceptable and even suitable that they depend on some other person for both education and moral training. Given that they are considered imperfect or incomplete, children fit easily into an adult model of childhood that is typically accepted as taken from nature, and not as a socially constructed concept. These particular convictions about children and childhood conform, of course to the exercise of adult dictatorship and this way, again, a form of social dependence is interpreted as a dependence which is "in nature." In addition, this tendency coexists with the understanding that "childhood" is the only period of the life-cycle which is able to redeem the evil of the world. Childhood corresponds to a period in human existence endowed only with ingenuity, beauty, goodness and purity, an endowment which everyone loses as they "grow up." The child's first nature, good and pure, is gradually replaced by a second



nature—one which is historically and socially constituted, defective and impure. This romantic point of view allows the peculiar conflicts of the child's life to be obscured, as well as children's doubts, afflictions and questions—i.e. their problems. This presumed inner harmony, the assumption of the absence of social conditioning, the apparent refusal of attribution of the limitations characteristic of adults, helps to construct childhood as a chronologically lost paradise. Even so, the notion of a lack remains: although there might be a radical absence of evil intentions, there's the absence of perspicacity as well.

We presume to know so much about children—whether it be because we have all been children, or because we have children around us, or even because we dedicate ourselves to their care, protection, study or education. In the first case, we ourselves become the measure of what we proclaim about childhood. We interpret children from ourselves—from what we've been, or from what we imagine we've been. Our individual experiences are perceived as models for the infant understanding of things. If something has happened to us, if some pattern has formed in our lives, we conclude that the same pattern applies to all the children.

In the second case we need to unpack the hidden meanings of the verb “to have” used in everyday speech that express our relationship with children, such as “How many children do you have?”, “We have three children”, or “I have many children in the classroom.” Such expressions imply possession of some kind—to have is the same as to own, to appropriate. We have what is our property, possession or guardianship. They are ours. On the basis of this implicit mandate, we exercise multiple kinds of power over them—paternal, institutional, legal, moral, and psychological, and whatever other shape the power of our sovereignty finds to assume.

In the third case, we exercise enough authority over children to protect them, feed them, educate them, amuse, and socialize them. These and other ways to hold children in our sway reflect adult domination, even if well-

intentioned. We study children, we know how they develop, even from the embryo. We define and name characteristics, stages, constitutive aspects. We classify and categorize moments, behaviors and attitudes. We anticipate the future. We foresee actions. We interpret gestures, movements and speech. Finally, we control childhood.

Paradoxically enough, our knowledge about childhood separates us from it. Changed into an object of analysis, studied as the many, childhood becomes merely a reference for academic research. We already know a lot about childhood. There's nothing more to say. But maybe that's preferable, for if there's nothing more to say about childhood, the time to learn with children what childhood has to say to us has come. Maybe childhood, like poetry, doesn't need to be analyzed, but felt. "I suffer the fear of analysis," says the poet Manoel de Barros. Children seems to repeat this plaint in a different voice.

Childhood

We need to rethink the conceptions of *beginning* to which childhood has usually been related. This implies giving up of what we think we know about childhood. This will make it possible to look at children and childhood with a teaching-less gaze, more receptive to the newness that each child brings with him or her. It also implies that we accept the risk of the unknown, the unforeseeable, or of what we have not previously seen. It implies that we have to face what only the new can cause: a sense of narrowed understanding, doubt, uncertainty and discomfort.

To think childhood only in the space allowed within the margins of our interpretative schemes is to mistrust the possibility that children can or have ever escaped those imposed dimensions. But what about thinking childhood on or outside those margins? The inaugural sense of childhood that literature—poetry, the novel, philosophy—has so often provided has long been kept at a distance in educational circles. The familiarity with childhood peculiar to Manoel



de Barros' poetry, for example, is dramatically different from the pseudo-scientific, proprietary tone of the educative texts. The dominant pedagogical speech, arrogant and one-sided or subtly moralistic, is undermined and confronted by poetic speech. To the poetic ear, the vocabulary and the intonation of this pedagogical speech sound false and empty, and need to be inhabited. This discourse needs people who can *live* inside it, says the poet. Or perhaps the poet would simply alert us to stand back from the security of our knowledge about childhood, to approach it through what of the child remains in us—those insistent residues, or those impertinent vestiges which we can't restrain or suppress.

Representations of childhood in literature reveal themselves as possibilities of incalculable value to the pedagogical construct of childhood. The childhood which is so authentically expressed in Barros' word-pictures are based, not on knowledge-so-called, but on mimesis, "the wish to be in things" which he declares for himself—the wish that children and poets seek to carry out. This mania to live stones, scraps, feelings and thoughts—this ludic way of hiding in things, creating words and generating ideas, inaugurating senses and expressions: both children and Barros play seriously with the circumspection of the senses, change the meanings of place and temporality, and demonstrate for those who can perceive it how arbitrary the senses and the meanings given to childhood by the "professionals" are. Barros and the children to whom he lends voices inhabit an undefined space where human, vegetal and mineral characteristics mix—a place before the classifications imposed by adult scientific knowledge. Theirs is a universe full of imagination, and constituted by the way that language itself is made. Such subversion breaks the limits of conventional meanings, and allows them to walk about freely, above all to change into new meanings, unreachable by the ordered and linear thinking of established logic.

Barros' character in his *Exercises In Being a Child* is just like the boy who carried water in a sieve. With his various forms of nonsense, the boy made his

father reflect about “the freedom and the poetry that we learn with children. And became” (1999, introduction). The boy brought forth tenderness in his mother and made her think that “maybe absurdities could be the greater virtues of poetry” (1999, *The Boy Who Carried Water in a Sieve*, s/p). He liked the empty because it is bigger than the full—and even boundless. Restless, “he perceived that he could make funny games with words. And he began to make funny games. He was able to stop a bird’s flight by putting a period at the end of the sentence. He was able to change the afternoon by putting rain on it” (id., ib.). His mother foresaw that he “would become a poet, who would fill the emptiness with his funny games and some people would love him for his nonsenses.” (id., ib.). And that’s the way it was.

To recover the inaugural gift of speech—its creative and motive power—and to recover with it a way of thinking that materializes it and a way of being that surrounds it, we need to return to the childhood of everything, and to Manoel de Barros’ poetry. His childhood and everyone’s childhood seem to be there, in that place to be investigated. This apparent nonsense of infantile things, of radical and simple questions. This curiosity, admiration and respect. This disposition toward the new in discovery, essential to any learning worthy of the name. This way inherent in children to search meanings without a preoccupation with teaching or learning them. It is in this way that we get close to children, and to what resists in us and makes us still children.

To value an infantile act as a virtue or a gift. To remove from the term “infant” the underestimating tone which results from adjectivizing. The search for childhood in ourselves in order to learn again, to forget what we already know and to allow ourselves to return to learn just as we once did. “Today I’m a hunter of childhood finding places,” says Barros. “I go a little demented and with the grubber on my shoulder to dig in my yard for the remains of the children we’ve been...” (2003, *Finding places*). To dig for the childhood of each one of us, this is how the poet is addressing us—with intimacy and even a certain



impropriety, this is what he seems to suggest to us.

The multiform and rebel speech of children, capable of discomfiting adult schemes of comprehension, reveals itself as in league with the literary language generative of new meaning, and the friend of philosophical questions, those questions that always remain for us to ask. Why not to combine them? Childhood and philosophy. Philosophy and literature. Literature and childhood. What other combinations are possible? What images of childhood might be transposable from one knowledge area to other? How might or should education insert itself in this mix? Childhood figures from literature might be rendered referential points in our inquiry into the educational act. The transposition of these images from a literary context to the educational environment might change educational practice into a poetic act and this way, make of the educator the creator. The search for a poetic intimacy with childhood might, moreover, act to resolve in a greater integration those traditional dichotomies which so often render educational practice stagnant: childhood-adulthood, teaching-learning, teacher-pupil.

Who knows what we might dare to think in a rigorous and deep study of childhood which included the attributes inherent in children and in poetry? Perhaps a thematic profile that is changeable, boundless, movable and playful? An intense and single, simple and smart, careful and deprived search. A detailed investigation of the structure of pedagogical speech about childhood. A digging in the direction of its historical, cultural and moral foundations, in a quest for the breaches and cracks in the didacticism, the uniformity, the hegemonic poverty of the conventional discourses of childhood. Maybe we could find, in the simple poetic dimension, what deep possibility the educational act seems always to incarnate and offer.

Manoel de Barros' poetry reveals itself as a field of multiple interpretative realizations, and reveals ourselves to ourselves as multiple, diverse and simultaneous as well. His texts put us in conflict through facing us with the

constitutive diversity of our own discourses. As we read him, we start to question the different languages necessary to understand ourselves and to comprehend the other. Berta Waldman (1990), in commenting on Barros' poetry, goes back to the roots of the poetic vocation, which always brings with it a feeling of discontent in the face of life-as-we-find-it, which motivates the writer to obliterate it to convert it, in an act of creation, into another, made of words. It seems to us that it is in these roots that Barros' poetry discovers childhood as a nucleus of decisive experience, a primordial fountain with which other elements of experience aggregate. But the author not only goes back to the past in quest of his childhood, he also keeps it with him in his adulthood. "His coherence is like that of the tree that changes but doesn't move," says Waldman (op. cit. p. 15). This image helps us to think about his own dialogue with his literary pictures of childhood, and to contrast that dialogue with the ways of understanding children that inhabit educational discourse. We hope that new readings of childhood might emerge from this interaction. Like Barros, we intend to approach our own childhood – to imagine ourselves as the tree that changes even as it stays in the same place. Instead of avoiding what is childish in us, to know these little remains of childhood in us better in order to be transformed.

The parallels between Manoel de Barros' poetry and a new reading of childhood extend in the direction of rethinking adulthood as well. Seen in this way, to reconsider our readings of childhood is necessarily to remake our concepts about adult life. Barros' poetry helps us inaugurate this rethinking not only through its content, but also in its shape. It's not a story about a Brazilian swamp that unfolds the poetic word of such an author. Nature is perceived neither as a background nor as a theoretical reference. Rather, it is the foundation of his poetry. Analogously, we don't intend to speak about childhood through critical analysis, even one which compares different perspectives or persuasions. Our intention is, fundamentally, to be with childhood – to keep it with us, to hear it, to review it, to learn with it.



As Barros teaches us—and as children know very well how to do—we need to create our own universe of images, in which meaning is formed in the very language that constructs it. To create—who knows?—a new linguistic field, from which fresh understandings about childhood, adulthood, and the act of teaching can arise. Barros' poetry demonstrates a way to write which is capable of beginning to go beyond the speakable, to test the conditions of its own expressive possibility. In this going beyond, we begin to perceive childhood. The author's poetic language itself approaches the childish way of life. Only children can know things by transmuting themselves into them, by knowing and being at the same time. Children turn into animals, plants, stones and toys. "Now I'm this or that,"—the child uses this affirmation and thereby internalizes what he says. The thing becomes a constitutive part of the child-subject. Verbs are confused in this transgressive childish action. Only the child can overtake the boundaries of perception and create cross-figurations such as "to see with the ears," "to listen with the mouth," "to write with the body." Only children and Manoel de Barros.

In Our Own Way

The "dizzy girl"—Manoel de Barros' character in his *Exercises In Being a Child*—when relating the afternoon adventures in which was involved, mentions an invented river that needed to be crossed. She and her brother had gone on a trip in a small wooden packing box with two guava jam tins as tires. They "pulled the little car fastened with a rope. But the car says it was pulled by two oxen" (1999, *The Dizzy Girl*). But to get to the city where her brother's girlfriend was, they needed to cross the river. "On the crossing the car sank and the oxen drowned. I didn't die," affirms the dizzy girl, "because the river was invented" (id., ib.).

This dizzy girl teaches us that if we invent the way to reach our intended goals, we can take a moveable and mutant course. We'll be able to alter it when we judge it is necessary, and to create ways to continue it in ways that we want.

We won't have to surrender to one shape, because we'll be the inventors of the course. If reading, like writing, is characterized by the construction of meanings, so it will be possible for us to elaborate a different way to think childhood and to describe it to ourselves.

Academic language won't lose its solidity and its credibility if it has to interact with the poetic structure of a literary text, or even with the multiform construction of childish language. If we conceive of language as an effective tool, it can be for us an interactive link, a space which can make possible the practice of several kinds of acts. After all, it's the exercise of speech on language which conducts us toward different ways of reading, and which can make of the written text an interactive practice. The cheerful exercises performed by Manoel de Barros in his poems shows us new dimensions in the spacious field of verbal possibilities, and thus encourage us to create new ways to comprehend childhood. Such a possibility for creative comprehension is needed if we are to recognize that the child has an extremely complex approach to language and to the multiple expressive resources within it. To utilize this "internalized grammar" in our texts, and to bring them closer to the language of children would be to sublimate the contrastive pair "adult-child" in a new synthesis.

The human universality that poetic and literary child-narratives is capable of promoting is a powerful motivator and enabler of personal and multicultural development. Beginning with the small—the microspace of childhood particularized by Barros—we can universalize the theme and enlarge it to the macrosphere. This displacement might move us to the field of meanings where teaching and learning become poetic activities. What might it mean to perceive the poetic dimension of mathematics, biology, of the sciences as a whole? As poetic teachers we would be preoccupied, not only with teaching, but with the "letting-learn," the releasement or *gellassenheit* anticipated by Heidegger. But we should not underestimate the difficulty of the renunciation involved.

If, as we have been assuming, emotionality is an inseparable dimension of



human activity, it is impossible to exclude it from any dialogical relation. It is unwise to attempt to think the teaching-learning act without including the emotional field. Dialogue is an intrinsic condition for the learning process, and the notion of a simple exteriority an illusion. Childhood as we have come to understand here makes of teaching—as of reading and writing in general—a poetic experience, full of feelings, emotion and reason.

What we propose as a project of inquiry is in this case the same as many others, but also profoundly different, and difficult to inaugurate, for here the object—childhood—is altered by the gaze of the inquirer herself, which implicitly changes the character and even the details of the methodology which follow from the gaze. We might predict that such a methodology would be less harshly scientific—even if harshly poetic and theoretically well-structured—and capable of enlarging the object of inquiry through transgression and recombination and integration of knowledge territories. Such a methodology would be capable of linking education, philosophy and literature through the images and discourses that childhood evokes.

To talk about the childhood invented by Barros, by his memories and ours, and to search for new concepts of childhood, demands a different approach to both. Like the poet, we have to search for—even to invent—our own form of inquiry, and to comprehend and to change into a written text that childhood which we find. The challenge is even bigger if we think about performing this deed in the academic space formally institutionalized by the scientific method. Whatever! We'll make an effort to be serious and buoyant, hard and mischievous, movable and constant as children can be, as Manoel de Barros is, and as an academic research could be. After all, we're always engaged in exercising something in and around us. And in his exercise of being child, he has already prevented us from reaching any putative end. His dizzy girl, after her long adventurous journey in the company of her brother in an imagined oxcart, having crossed a dangerous river in the direction of a dreamed city, informs us:

“We always only could get to the end of the yard...” (id. ib.). But the poet delights us with the wonders of each detail along the way, and subtly communicates to us the nobility of the task.

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